MEDIATING PEACE IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD ORDER
CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS ON CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Content

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Introduction

The second Austrian Forum for Peace (AFP) engaged with the significant challenges posed to peacebuilding initiatives by the increasingly fragmented global order. In a world where geopolitical power is no longer concentrated in the hands of a small number of actors – the majority of them liberal powers from the Global North – the forum emphasised the need to uphold the foundational principles of international law, with a particular focus on international humanitarian law. These legal frameworks have long served as cornerstones for maintaining global peace and security, ensuring that states and non-state actors adhere to established norms during conflicts. The Geneva Conventions from 1949, for example, have been pivotal in setting standards for humanitarian treatment during war, underscoring the importance of legal frameworks in conflict situations.

However, the AFP also highlighted the necessity of recognising and engaging with emerging regional and international powers, such as China, India, Brazil, and others, who have considerable influence on reshaping the global landscape (Ehrmann and Haron, 2024). These powers often bring alternative perspectives on international law and governance, viewing existing legal frameworks as tools that preserve an allegedly outdated global order dominated by Western powers (Acharya, 2014). For instance, China's approach to territorial disputes in the South China Sea and its ambivalent stance towards international arbitration represent a broader scepticism among emerging powers about the impartiality and fairness of international law as it currently stands (Beckman, 2013).

This dual focus – upholding international law while fostering collaborative relationships with rising powers – poses a substantial contradiction. On the one hand, adherence to international law is crucial for global stability, ensuring that all actors, regardless of power, are held to the same standards. On the other hand, emerging powers may perceive these laws as relics of a previous era, designed to maintain the status quo rather than reflect the evolving redistribution of power and influence at the global stage. The AFP recognised this tension and stressed the importance of finding a balance that both respects established legal norms and accommodates the aspirations of new global players.

This working paper seeks to delve deeper into the implications of this fragmented world order for peace mediation efforts. It explores emerging perspectives on mediating peace amidst this fragmentation at different levels. Traditionally, peace mediation has been guided by two key paradigms: harmonisation and planning/implementation. These two paradigms reflect a structured approach to conflict resolution, where the primary goal is to bring conflicting parties together under a unified framework and implement a systematic plan for peace.

The working paper begins by providing a brief overview of these paradigms, setting the stage for a more detailed analysis of how current fragmentation dynamics are challenging this traditional approach. The rise of multipolarity, the resurgence of nationalism, and the increasing role of non-state actors are just a few factors contributing to this fragmentation, complicating the landscape of peace mediation. In its final section, the paper discusses potential approaches to armed conflict mediation and post-conflict transitions that might be more effective in this context of fragmentation. It assesses whether new strategies are required to address the unique challenges

posed by a fragmented global order and how these strategies might be implemented to foster sustainable peace in an increasingly complex world.

Peace Mediation in the Age of Global Liberalism

Liberal peacebuilding has long been conceptualised as a mechanism for promoting a liberal world order, characterised by the spread of open markets, liberal democracy, and good governance. Such an approach – often driven by Western powers and international organisations – is rooted in the belief that peace can be engineered through the establishment of political and economic structures that reflect liberal values. Central to this vision – somewhat bizarrely, given the principled openness of liberalism as a political vision – is the idea of planning: constructing peaceful societies from the top down, typically through comprehensive peace agreements and carefully-designed roadmaps aimed at transforming conflict-affected societies.

As shown above, there are two key processes at the core of liberal peacebuilding: harmonisation and planning/implementation. Harmonisation processes emphasise the need to streamline and coordinate peace negotiations, often under the leadership of a single, jointly-accepted mediator – most likely a state, a group of states, or an international organisation. This approach aims to bring all conflicting parties together around a negotiation table, fostering an environment where inclusive dialogue can take place. The goal is to develop a unified peace architecture that encompasses all stakeholders, with broad international participation and support. All parties should be aligned under one overarching framework, which is expected to

guide the peacebuilding process as a whole (Paris, 2004).

The second paradigm, planning and implementation, focuses on the meticulous identification of the root causes of a given conflict, followed by the creation of agreements designed to address – and ideally resolve – these root causes systematically. The implementation phase typically involves a transitional government – often a power-sharing arrangement among the conflicting parties – which is tasked with executing the agreed-upon transitional program. However, this approach has faced significant challenges and has rarely succeeded in achieving its intended outcomes. One of the primary reasons for this failure is the inherent weakness of power-sharing governments. Rather than working towards genuine peace, these governments often continue the conflict through political means, as seen in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina thirty years after the Dayton Agreement. Power-sharing arrangements regularly lead to what Bell and Pospisil (2017) term a 'formalised political unsettlement,' where the conflict's root causes remain unresolved and the peace process stagnates.

The focus on implementation often overshadows the critical need for political and societal transformation. The technical tasks outlined in peace agreements, while essential, can divert attention from the more complex processes required to move a society from conflict to peace. Mary Kaldor's concept of 'civicness' (Kaldor and Radice, 2022) highlights this issue, stressing the importance of fostering changes in governance modalities, collective thinking, and societal psyche. Kaldor argues that true peace requires a transformation in how societies govern themselves and how individuals relate to one another. Changes cannot be achieved merely

through the mechanical implementation of pre-negotiated agreements.

Finally, societal changes – a cornerstone of lasting peace – eschew plannability in the same way as political or economic reforms. The internal contradiction of liberal peacebuilding lies in its reliance on thorough planning with the aim to establish open, democratic societies based on good governance. This approach assumes that complex social dynamics can be engineered and controlled – an assumption that has not only proven to be false, but also fundamentally contradicts the conceptual cornerstones of political liberalism. As scholars like Richmond (2011) have noted, liberal peacebuilding efforts therefore frequently fail to account for the organic, unpredictable nature of societal change, leading to interventions disconnected from the realities on the ground.

This critique of liberal peacebuilding underscores the need for a more flexible, context-sensitive approach to peacebuilding – one that recognises the limitations of top-down planning and the importance of supporting organic, bottom-up processes of social transformation. As this working paper argues, addressing the challenges of peace mediation in a fragmented world requires rethinking these traditional paradigms and developing new strategies that are better suited to the complexities of contemporary conflicts.

The persistence of these processes in peacebuilding, despite their evident shortcomings, can be attributed to a combination of international pressure and entrenched routine practices. International support for peace processes has traditionally been aligned with major global institutions like the United Nations (UN), regional organisations such as the African Union (AU),

and a variety of formal and informal groups, including Troikas and Groups of Friends, that have coalesced around specific peace initiatives. These entities have provided the necessary diplomatic backing, financial resources, and legitimacy to peace processes, thereby reinforcing the use of conventional approaches rooted in liberal peacebuilding paradigms (Tschirgi, 2004).

Over time, this method of approaching peace negotiations – characterised by top-down planning and the imposition of externally-driven frameworks – became routine. This routine, while initially grounded in the expertise and experience of seasoned diplomats and international organisations, eventually transformed into what William Easterly (2014) describes as the 'tyranny of experts.' According to Easterly, this phenomenon occurs when technocratic expertise overrides local knowledge and context, leading to the implementation of rigid, formulaic solutions that fail to address the complex realities on the ground. In the context of liberal peacebuilding, this has manifested as an abysmal cycle of planning and implementation, where the emphasis on technical solutions has overshadowed the need for more flexible, context-sensitive approaches (Mac Ginty, 2011).

The routine nature of these practices has rendered them increasingly unsustainable in the face of evolving global dynamics. The academic community, particularly scholars of critical peacebuilding, have mounted significant critiques against the liberal peacebuilding model, pointing out its limitations and failures. Oliver Richmond (2012) and Roger Mac Ginty (2011), for instance, have argued that liberal peacebuilding often fails to achieve its goals because it imposes a one-size-fits-all model that ignores local contexts and perpetuates

existing power imbalances. However, despite these critiques, there has been a reluctance to directly confront the entrenched routine – the very 'disaster' that has turned peacebuilding into a mechanical exercise, detached from the nuanced realities of the societies it aims to transform.

Moreover, these practices have become increasingly unworkable in a world marked by fragmentation and the consequent rise in geopolitical turbulence. The fragmentation of global power, with the emergence of new regional players and the declining influence of traditional Western powers, has disrupted the once-coherent frameworks that underpinned peace negotiations and peacebuilding. This fragmentation has introduced a new level of unpredictability and chaos in peace processes, making it clear that the old routines are no longer sufficient or effective (Chandler, 2010). The emerging multipolarity and the rise of non-state actors have further complicated the peacebuilding landscape, demanding a departure from the entrenched routines of the past and a move towards more adaptable and inclusive strategies.

The challenges that this new context elicits call for a rethinking of peacebuilding approaches. As the global order becomes more fragmented, there is a growing need to move beyond the tyranny of routine and towards a more dynamic, locally-informed, and contextually-responsive mode of peacebuilding. This shift would involve not only the abandonment of outdated practices but also the development of new methodologies that are better suited to the complexities of contemporary conflict and peace processes.

Two Dynamics of Fragmentation

What does the 'new' context of fragmentation mean? The concept of fragmentation has become increasingly prevalent in peacebuilding literature, reflecting the growing complexity and disarray in global and regional order. When discussing fragmentation, scholars and practitioners often refer to the disintegration of previously stable and coherent structures, whether political, social, or economic. The term has gained prominence alongside related concepts such as hybridity and hybrid peace, which have been explored by scholars like Richmond and Mitchell (2011) in their attempts to address the challenges posed by fragmented environments. The idea of hybrid peacebuilding suggests a blending of international and local practices, but it also inherently acknowledges the fractured nature of contemporary conflicts and societies.

Fragmentation is not just a conceptual approach but has also been linked to emerging theoretical frameworks in international relations, such as the quantum approach proposed by scholars like Der Derian and Wendt (2020). This approach draws parallels between the principles of quantum mechanics – such as complementarity, uncertainty, and entanglement – and the fluid, unpredictable nature of international relations today. These principles challenge traditional linear and deterministic models, suggesting instead that international processes are characterised by inherent uncertainties and complex interdependencies, much like the quantum world. For instance, the idea of 'superposition' in quantum mechanics, where entities can exist in multiple states simultaneously, could metaphorically describe how states or actors in international relations might hold

conflicting identities or interests that are not easily reconciled, which could be read as a fragmentation from within.

At the heart of these discussions is the notion that fragmentation involves a perceived or actual breakdown of previously stable configurations. This breakdown is evident in two interlinked processes: the fragmentation of context and the fragmentation of order, or, more precisely, the concept of order itself.

The first type of fragmentation refers to the disintegration of global and regional structures that once provided a semblance of order. The idea of a coherent world order has evolved – or perhaps devolved – into what some scholars describe as global ungovernance. As Desai and Lang (2020) suggest, rather than progressing towards a unified system of global governance, we are witnessing a retreat into more chaotic and uncoordinated forms of global inter-action. Regional configurations, which were once seen as potential building blocks for a new global order, are increasingly becoming the focal points of international conflict mediation. However, these regional blocs, whether in Africa, Asia, or the Middle East, exhibit turbulence and fluidity rather than stability. Alliances form and dissolve rapidly, and state interests can shift unpredictably, rendering it impossible to establish lasting structures that could be institutionalised.

This fragmentation is particularly evident in the Global South, where the manifestation of statehood often only exists in fragments. In a considerable number of instances, the idea that states are undergoing a process of fragmentation may be misleading. Instead, it might be more accurate to describe these states as inherently fragmented from the outset. Joel Migdal's 'state-in-society' approach (2001) high-lights how states in many parts of the world have always functioned more as fragmented entities – composed of islands of governance and artifacts of statehood – rather than as coherent, unified entities. These states often prioritise the survival of their elites over the broader concept of statehood, leading to a governance model that is fragmented both in its structure and in its effectiveness.

Accompanying this fragmentation of context is the breakdown of the idea of global or regional order. The height of global governance in the 1990s, marked by ambitious initiatives like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), has given way to a period of decline. The R2P doctrine, which sought to redefine state sovereignty by holding states accountable for protecting their populations from atrocities, represented the apex of a normative shift towards greater international responsibility. However, the fading influence of such radical concepts underscores the decline of global governance as a driving force in international relations.

Regional efforts to establish order, such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), have also struggled to gain sustainable traction. Despite the pro-mise of APSA to provide a structured and coherent approach to peace and security in Africa, its impact has been limited by the same forces of fragmentation that challenge global governance. The failure of APSA and similar initiatives to establish enduring regional orders reflects the broader disintegration of the idea that stable, hierarchical structures can effectively manage conflict and promote peace in today's fragmented world.

The challenge for peacebuilding is not just to navigate fragmentation but to reconceptualise what order and governance could mean in a world where traditional

approaches to structure and international institutions no longer hold. This requires a shift away from outdated models of statehood and global governance and towards more adaptive, flexible approaches that can respond to the realities of fragmented contexts and the complex, often chaotic, nature of contemporary international relations.

The belief in concepts of regional and inter-regional order has significantly waned in recent years, particularly within the context of peacebuilding. This decline reflects a broader disillusionment in the ability of regional structures to provide the stability and coherence necessary for effective conflict resolution. In peacebuilding, this shift has provided the conceptual backdrop for the emergence of new approaches, such as the 'local turn' advocated by scholars like Richmond and Mac Ginty (2013). This approach emphasises the importance of local agency, recognising that sustainable peace must be grounded in the specific cultural, social, and political contexts of the affected regions, rather than imposed through external frameworks.

Similarly, in the broader field of development, this shift in thinking has been mirrored by the rise of concepts like resilience. Scholars such as Pospisil and Kuehn (2016), along with Chandler (2014), have argued that resilience reflects a move away from top-down, externally-driven development models towards approaches that prioritise the capacity of local communities to adapt to and recover from conflicts and crises. Resilience, in this sense, is not just about bouncing back to a previous state but about fundamentally transforming social and political structures along the vision to better withstand future shocks. This shift signifies a growing recognition that traditional models of governance and peacebuilding are ill-suited to the fragmented and complex realities of the modern world.

Despite these advances in local and resilience-based approaches, discussions have often failed to generate more creative exchanges within the realm of international peacemaking. The critique of liberalism, which has been central to the development of these new approaches, has frequently become entangled with the concept of 'inclusivity.' Inclusivity, while ostensibly a progressive goal, has in many cases fallen short of addressing the deeper challenges posed by fragmentation. Instead, it has often led to a reaffirmation of liberal peacebuilding principles under the guise of broader participation. This represents a retreat into familiar liberal paradigms, where the emphasis on inclusivity sometimes becomes a superficial exercise, masking the underlying issues of power and control that remain unaddressed.

One of the most significant remnants of liberal peacebuilding that persists despite these critiques is the focus on root causes. The liberal framework treats root causes as objective factors that can be identified, measured, and addressed through well-planned policy interventions, ideally guided by a thorough theory of change. However, in the context of fragmentation, such an approach is doomed to fail. Root causes are not objective conditions but are deeply contested and disputed within a contentious post-conflict political landscape. The assumption that conflicts can be resolved by addressing these root causes, without considering the complex and dynamic interplay of local, regional, and global factors, is one of the elements where liberal peacebuilding turns from a conceptual approach into ideology.

The challenge, therefore, is to envision how a radical departure from liberal peacemaking ideas might look in an era of fragmentation. Such a departure would require moving beyond the constraints of inclusivity as currently understood and rethinking the role of what is called root causes in conflict resolution. It involves embracing the uncertainties and complexities inherent in fragmented contexts and developing new methodologies that are not only more flexible but also more attuned to the realities of the diverse actors and interests involved in peace processes. This might include more radical forms of bottom-up peacebuilding that, prioritise local knowledge and practices, or innovative approaches that integrate non-linear and adaptive strategies drawn from other fields, such as complex systems theory (Cilliers, 2002).

Ultimately, overcoming the limitations of liberal peacemaking in a fragmented world requires a paradigm shift – one that not only critiques the shortcomings of the past but also actively seeks out new frameworks that are better suited to the fluid and contested nature of contemporary global politics. This shift would mark a move away from the idea that peace can be engineered through technocratic means and towards a more nuanced understanding of peace as an emergent, context-dependent process that requires ongoing negotiation and adaptation.

Peace Mediation in the Context of Fragmentation

Against the backdrop of a fragmented and complex global order, it has become increasingly clear what not to do in peacebuilding. Comprehensive peace agreements and transitional roadmaps – central to the liberal peacebuilding agenda – appear as relics of a bygone era. These frameworks were guided by the belief that post-conflict societies could be systematically designed and then built by power-sharing governments composed of former adversaries. Even during the height of liberal peacebuilding, the effectiveness of such approaches was questionable; today, they seem entirely impossible. The very idea that a recently forged coalition of enemies could cohesively implement a comprehensive peace plan underlines the inherent challenges and the outdated assumptions of these strategies.

Simultaneously, the concept of harmonisation in peace negotiations – where one designated mediator leads all parties through a unified process with broad stakeholder inclusion – has reached its practical limits. In an era characterised by fragmentation and multipolarity, the notion that peace negotiations can proceed unchallenged under a single mediator's guidance is increasingly unrealistic. The reality on the ground reflects a turbulence in peacemaking, where multiple initiatives – sometimes collaborative but more often competitive – coexist and evolve dynamically. This environment of competing peace efforts underscores the limitations of traditional approaches and highlights the need for a new methodology that can operate effectively within this fragmented landscape.

The primary challenge, therefore, is not to attempt to overcome this fragmentation. Such an endeavour would be akin to turning back the clock to a time that no longer exists. Instead, the focus must shift to how peacebuilders can productively engage with these new conditions. Central to this approach is the need to emphasise process over implementation. In this context, Christine Bell's (2024) concept of 'multimediation,' as introduced in her article in the Accord

series by Conciliation Resources, offers a compelling alternative. Bell defines multi-mediation as an approach where multiple mediators, representing diverse interests and perspectives, are simultaneously or sequentially engaged in the peace process. This method recognises the complex realities of contemporary conflicts, where no single mediator or entity can adequately address the multifaceted nature of the issues at hand. Instead, multimediation allows for a more inclusive, dynamic, and responsive process that can adapt to the evolving needs of the situation and the stakeholders involved (Bell, 2024).

Another critical element is a revisiting of the often-dismissed concept of 'negative peace' as articulated by Johan Galtung. Galtung defines negative peace as 'the absence of violence, absence of war' (Galtung, 1969). Traditionally, this concept has been viewed pejoratively, lacking the positive elements required for building a just and stable society. However, this interpretation overlooks the potential of negative peace as a framework for continuous reflection and critique. Drawing on the ideas of Theodor Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, negative peace can be reinterpreted as an invitation to embrace openness, permanent reflection, and critique. Adorno argues that dialectics are a form of disintegration: 'disintegration of the prepared and objectified form of the concepts which the cognitive subject faces' (Adorno, 1990: 144) or disintegration of the real-life value of comprehensive societal plans, for instance. This perspective aligns with a process-focused approach to peace mediation and peacemaking, where the emphasis is on maintaining an ongoing dialogue and critically assessing each step in the process rather than striving for a final, fixed solution.

In this reimagined framework, peace mediation is not about imposing a fixed solution but about facilitating dynamic dialogue. The goal is to create opportunities for critical junctures in ungoverned processes of transition – moments where joint decision-making can occur in ways that are responsive to the specificities of the situation. These junctures represent potential turning points where new paths forward can be identified and pursued – often in unpredictable ways. Such processes, by their nature, cannot be planned in the traditional sense; they can only be prepared for, with no certainty of their eventual occurrence. This preparation involves setting the stage for these critical junctures, ensuring that when they arise, the actors involved are ready to engage constructively.

While these processes require some form of transitional programme, the focus should shift away from a belief in implementation as a panacea for peacebuilding. Instead, the emphasis should be on preparing for critical junctures within long-term political transitions. The identification of such junctures – where significant decisions can be made and where transitions can take new, productive directions – must become a central task for peacemakers in the context of fragmentation. Developing methodological tools to identify and leverage these moments of transition is crucial for creating peace processes that are adaptable, resilient, and responsive to the complexities of modern conflicts.

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